



# The Top Seven Myths of U.S. Defense Policy Toward the Americas

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*This article has been adapted from a speech delivered by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Frank O. Mora at the Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami on 29 April 2010.*

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PHOTO: President Barack Obama greets President Lula da Silva of Brazil on 14 March 2009 in the Oval Office. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

RECENT DISCUSSIONS AND commentaries on U.S. defense policy in the Americas have created a number of myths regarding the Obama administration's approach to the region and a series of inaccuracies that require clarification.<sup>1</sup> This article makes clear the rationale and purpose of U.S. defense policy in the Western Hemisphere and highlights some of the inconsistencies, mischaracterizations, and fallacies of the arguments that inform these myths.

## Myth One: The United States is inattentive to the Americas

The first myth is the notion that the Obama administration takes the Americas for granted by paying it insufficient attention, a charge frequently heard from commentators on hemispheric relations.<sup>2</sup> Such accusations, however, are factually inaccurate. Indeed, the very fact that the United States is developing a new tone and new relationships by moving away from the Manichean and "one-size fits all" policies of old is a sign that the administration is giving ample attention to the region. High-level visits are one indicator: President Obama met with President Felipe Calderón of Mexico while still president-elect, traveled to Mexico on two occasions, and hosted Mexico's first couple in his administration's second state visit, highlighting the importance of the U.S.-Mexico relationship; President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil was one of the first foreign leaders to meet with the President in the Oval Office; the President also received then Chilean President Michelle Bachelet and then Colombian President Alvaro Uribe; Vice President Joe Biden visited Chile and Costa Rica; and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have both recently toured the region, as have the secretaries of Commerce and Transportation, and the Attorney General. In short, President Obama, cabinet officials, and sub-cabinet officials are in frequent contact with their counterparts in the Americas as we partner to improve collaboration in areas of mutual interest.

Many of the charges of inattention stem from the fact that this administration has not developed a catchy slogan or cookie-cutter approach to

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>OCT 2010</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Top Seven Myths of U.S. Defense Policy Toward the Americas</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Military Review, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 66027</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>9</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

the region; there is no “Good Neighbor Policy,” “Alliance for Progress,” “Free Trade Area of the Americas,” or “Monroe Doctrine” to which one can easily point. The lack of a slogan, however, does not indicate a lack of strategy. The President’s nuanced approach tends to tailor policies to the distinct characteristics of individual countries and their relations with the United States. Flexibility is increasingly important because the Western Hemisphere is a dynamic and constantly evolving region that has changed considerably in recent decades. The administration recognizes that the challenges and nature of U.S. relations with countries such as Brazil and Chile are fundamentally different than those present in relationships with countries such as Mexico and Colombia and each therefore requires a unique approach. Similarly, the security challenges of the Caribbean and Central America and its geographic proximity to the United States are another example of the need for tailored policies. As a result, the umbrella approaches that characterized past U.S. policy are no longer appropriate. In fact, they can be counterproductive.

Strategically targeted engagement is the most appropriate course of action in the Americas, and indeed, for U.S. foreign policy as a whole in the 21st century. As the 2010 National Security Strategy notes, the United States will continue to rely on close friends and allies to collectively ensure global security, but this alone is not sufficient. The United States will also work to cultivate deeper partnerships with new “key centers of influence,” “emerging nations,” and even “hostile nations” because of our conviction that “our own interests are bound to the interests of those beyond our borders.”<sup>3</sup> In the regional security space, the United States pursues policies such as the Merida Initiative, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, bilateral working groups, and Defense Cooperation Agreements such as those signed with Brazil and Colombia. These partnerships permit more creativity by allowing the United States and its partners to optimize limited resources in an increasingly complex environment. They highlight a shift in the objectives of the U.S. Department of Defense’s policy initiatives. As the region continues to make strides, the goal is for the United States to expand beyond the traditional focus on “assistance” to concentrate on neighbors’ needs in developing the capacity to confront the security

challenges that threaten all of us. In other words, we should no longer judge U.S. engagement and commitment by absolute increases or decreases in foreign aid, but rather by how successful the United States is in partnering with regional neighbors to build their expertise and competence for their own security and that of the region as a whole. This is not only smart policy, but also a deliberate change from past U.S. policies that were paternalistic and shortsighted. The well-being of the United States is linked intrinsically to a secure and prosperous hemisphere, and this administration is committed to doing what is possible to achieve the true long-term solution: self-sufficiency of our neighbors.

### **Myth Two: U.S. focus on partnership precludes leadership in the Americas**

The second myth is that the Obama administration’s focus on partnership in the region is naïve or misguided because it eschews U.S. leadership in the hemisphere. It is true that President Obama has emphasized that the United States seeks partnership in the region on equal terms, with no senior and junior partners.<sup>4</sup> Because he recognizes the unprecedented interconnectedness of the hemisphere and the world in the 21st century, President Obama has embraced the idea of a new era of engagement based on mutual respect, common interest, and shared values. As he emphasized at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad & Tobago in April 2009, one important justification for this new spirit of partnership and engagement is that there are numerous areas of mutual interest in the Americas that demand collective action, and one of these areas is our common security.<sup>5</sup>

True leadership demands a clear understanding of the current environment. Security threats in the Americas tend to be transnational, and the United States would be remiss if it did not convey its commitment to, and pursue policies that advance, increased interoperability and cooperation across borders. Simply put, transnational challenges require multinational solutions. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in his remarks at the November 2009 German Marshall Fund Security Conference in Halifax, Canada, natural disasters and arms and narco-trafficking are among the biggest concerns in the hemisphere and countering



**Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates addresses the audience as Canadian Minister of National Defense Peter MacKay, left, and Craig Kennedy, president of the German Marshall Fund, look on during the Halifax International Security Forum in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 20 November 2009.**

them “require[s] an uncommon degree of coordination among the national-security, homeland-defense, and criminal-justice agencies of our governments, as these threats do not fit into the neat, discrete boxes of 20th century organization charts.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, events such as the 2009 coup in Honduras, the 2010 earthquakes in Chile and Haiti, and the struggle against drug trafficking in Mexico and Central America confirm that President Obama and Secretary Gates are justified in asserting that U.S. security is linked to the improved security of the hemisphere as a whole. The threats and challenges we face are shared and therefore demand partnership because multilateral action has become a necessary precondition for ensuring security.

The need for partnership, however, does not preclude U.S. leadership. The Obama administration has repeatedly demonstrated its leadership in the region, and it will remain steadfast in defending and promoting U.S. strategic interests within relevant legal frameworks and in accordance with our national values. In addition, the United States will respect the national values of our neighbors and have the courage to allow others to lead, as they are doing today

in Haiti. The United States stands alone at its own peril and benefits when other countries assert leadership and assume responsibility in pursuit of common goals. Indeed, it is in the exercise of such leadership that our neighbors better understand what is required, and what is at stake for the region’s well-being.

The U.S. reaction to the earthquake in Haiti is perhaps the most obvious example of U.S. leadership in a spirit of partnership. In the immediate wake of the tragedy, the speed and magnitude of the U.S. response was crucial to the relief effort. Indeed, the importance of the United States’ ability to deliver abundant resources and unique life-saving capabilities to Haiti in a time-sensitive environment cannot be underestimated. However, the United States also demonstrated its capacity to work as a partner by collaborating closely with countries such as Brazil to enable the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and others to provide relief and mitigate the Haitian people’s suffering. In the process, the region as a whole stood in solidarity with Haiti and developed valuable experience in responding to a catastrophic natural disaster that requires multi-national cooperation and coordination.



Another example of U.S. initiative is the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). In Trinidad, President Obama exercised leadership by recognizing the need to foster a collective and multi-national approach to illicit trafficking, committing the United States to strengthening cooperation on security matters in the Caribbean, and pledging roughly \$45 million to get started.<sup>7</sup> As the CBSI takes shape, all the countries involved are consulting closely with each other in a spirit of cooperation to develop processes and frameworks and identify strengths and weaknesses. The CBSI is a truly regional effort because the input of all countries involved has been incorporated.

In fact, Caribbean leaders deserve special praise for their political courage and leadership. It is no easy task to recognize that the best way to effectively combat the unlimited resources and reach of drug trafficking organizations is through creative, collective approaches to cooperation such as focusing on air, maritime, and land domain awareness, striving for mutually agreed-upon standard operating procedures, increasing information sharing, and procuring compatible and standardized communications equipment. Because of these leaders' commitments to the greater good, the region is now moving in this direction.

### **Myth Three: The Honduran coup was a defeat for U.S. regional engagement**

The third myth is that the coup in Honduras was a defeat for the Obama administration's engagement strategy because its position was inconsistent, confusing, and misguided. In truth, the administration's approach to the coup in Honduras fell within the larger framework of U.S. policy in the region: to be a partner whenever possible and a leader whenever necessary. Indeed, one element of the Obama administration's emphasis on collective action and partnership is a clear recognition of—and agreement with—past criticism that the U.S. approach to the region tended to be unilateral and therefore counterproductive. Thus, President Obama fulfilled his pledges by working in a multilateral fashion to make clear that the coup in Honduras was unacceptable. The United States worked closely with the Organization of American States, Honduran leaders, then President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, and other actors willing to make a positive contribution to a practical solution. When it

became apparent, however, that certain elements in the region either benefitted from the political gridlock that subsequently took hold—or simply had no real plan of action to break the impasse—senior-level U.S. involvement was crucial to the negotiations that ultimately led to the agreement that ensured Honduras' transition back to democratic governance. Frankly, criticism of the U.S. role has been, at times, disingenuous. As President Obama stated in August 2009 at a press conference with President Calderon and Prime Minister Harper, “the critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we’re always intervening, and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America. You can’t have it both ways.”<sup>8</sup> While consistent with larger U.S. foreign policy objectives, the administration's approach proved crucial to putting Honduras back on the path to democracy and demonstrated that the coups of the past no longer have any place in our Hemisphere.

In addition, it is necessary to highlight something that does not receive nearly enough attention: the Honduras experience created an important and positive precedent for how to confront similar challenges in the future. The response to the Honduran coup marks the first time that the notion of the collective defense of democracy in the Americas ceased to be merely rhetoric. The coup prompted the first formal invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter to suspend a country's participation in the Inter-American system. In other words, collective defense of democracy in the wake of the Honduran coup became actionable and practical, not merely something to strive for in the future. While its application was imperfect, the implications of a collective defense being triggered to support democracy could be lasting in countries where democratic governance is threatened. At a minimum, it underscores the need to strengthen collective mechanisms, and with support that does not come from the United States alone.

### **Myth Four: The U.S.-Colombia defense agreement is a threat to regional security**

The fourth myth is that the United States could use the 2009 U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) to threaten other countries in the region because it will allow for the creation of



**U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates is greeted by U.S. Ambassador to Colombia William R. Brownfield after his arrival in Bogota, Colombia, 14 April 2010.**

U.S. bases and therefore permit an increased U.S. military presence in South America. In fact, this agreement does not fundamentally change U.S.-Colombia defense relations. There will be no U.S. bases and no increased U.S. presence in Colombia as a result of the agreement. Congress establishes the limits on the number of U.S. military personnel and U.S. citizen civilian contractors through legislation, and any increase would require congressional action. Of course, Colombia is an important ally of the United States. The United States has a strong interest and commitment in Colombia's continued success and the DCA will ensure continued and effective cooperation in addressing security challenges.

The Department of Defense signed this agreement for two reasons. First, the agreement helps collaboration by improving, streamlining, and regularizing the numerous past defense cooperation agreements the United States has concluded with Colombia over the years. The type of cooperation that these agreements facilitate is crucial because—as President Obama and Secretary Gates have stressed—the threats in the region are transnational and require multinational approaches.

Second, the Obama administration has repeatedly emphasized that transparency is a key element to building trust and confidence on defense issues, a necessary precondition for a more peaceful and secure world. Defense cooperation agreements can clearly provide that type of transparency.

The ability of this type of agreement to improve defense cooperation and transparency also motivated, along with other considerations, the signing of the April 2010 DCA between the United States and Brazil. In addition to, for example, facilitating future technology transfer, the agreement had the added benefit of prioritizing our bilateral relationship. As Secretary Gates noted alongside Brazilian Minister of Defense Nelson Jobim at the signing of the DCA, the agreement is significant because it is a “formal acknowledgement of the many security interests and values we share as the two most populous democracies in the Americas.”<sup>9</sup> Minister Jobim also endorsed this notion at the DCA signing when he noted that “peace in the world as we know it will depend much and much more on transparency and this kind of relationship that we [the United States and Brazil] have now.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, as signatories to these agreements, Brazil, Colombia, and the United

States all affirm their commitment to respect the principles of sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter. In other words, these agreements do not pose a threat to any country. In fact, they increase security in the region by furthering shared understandings and responses to security challenges. The benefits of such military cooperation were never clearer than during the coordinated response to the earthquake in Haiti, when U.S., Brazilian, and Colombian personnel worked side-by-side with many others to deliver life-saving relief to the Haitian people.

### **Myth Five: The United States contributes to a growing arms race in the Americas**

The fifth myth is that the United States is contributing to—or is indifferent about—what some have characterized as a growing arms race in the Americas. The United States is neither contributing to nor is indifferent about any such thing. In fact, there is no arms race brewing in the hemisphere. As a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), none of these countries' defense budgets are close to exorbitant. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Colombia, Chile, and Ecuador were the only countries in the hemisphere that spent more than two percent of their 2008 GDP on defense matters.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the region has actually made measured strides in increasing transparency and creating mechanisms of defense and security cooperation through the development of regional institutions such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, in Spanish) and the Central American Integration System (SICA, in Spanish). Although its successes have not been sufficient, these institutions can facilitate regional understanding and thus reduce potential tensions, which is why the United States supports UNASUR and SICA.

In contrast to these positive trends, Venezuela's disproportionate and unnecessary purchase of arms has rightly caused some concern in the region. Other countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico have also increased defense expenditures, but they have done so because they face real modernization needs and/or internal security challenges from terrorism and narco-trafficking.

For example, modernization is the principal motive for Brazil's rising defense costs. Brazil has

been a regional leader in pushing for transparency bodies like UNASUR and has been forthcoming about the implications of its 2008 National Strategy of Defense, which recognizes the importance of increasing its air, land, and maritime domain awareness to secure its borders, combat illegal trafficking, and improve citizen security. Indeed, Brazil has made military and other forms of public service a priority and linked its procurement approach to economic development through homegrown defense industries and technology transfers. In other words, Brazil is focused inwards, and its increasing expenditures—whether for personnel, helicopters, tanks, or fighter aircraft—are reflective of that.

Similarly, Chile has steadily and openly pursued modernization since at least 2002. An F-16 purchase from the United States was to modernize its aging air force, a key strategic priority for a country whose Pacific territory extends thousands of miles from its mainland. It seems far-fetched to argue that this particular upgrade—or the now winding-down modernization process—is a shift to a more aggressive posture.

Colombia's situation is different. The Colombian government faces an armed internal conflict with terrorists and narco-traffickers. President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy has been successful, but the policy requires resources. Colombia has focused on making its forces as mobile and effective at counterinsurgency as possible. The navy is a good example; it has focused on becoming an effective brown-water force, with new river support stations and a new coast guard service.<sup>12</sup> Despite President Chavez's attempts to distort the truth, Colombia's procurement and expenditures posture is consistent with a country focused on defeating a brutal domestic threat.

Mexico also finds itself in a struggle with organized crime. President Calderon's leadership and courage in this matter deserves praise. In terms of arms procurement and defense expenditures, there is a new focus on buying items such as pick-up trucks, ocean-patrol vessels, interceptor craft, helicopters, and surveillance aircraft suitable for the challenges Mexico currently faces.<sup>13</sup>

Venezuela, however, boasts of signing agreements reportedly worth billions of dollars with Russia for weapons that are primarily suitable for conventional war. President Chavez's desire for

Kalashnikov rifles and Sukhoi jet fighters does little to promote citizen security or combat the illicit trafficking that is increasingly taking hold in Venezuela. Furthermore, President Chavez has cloaked these transactions in secrecy, which flies in the face of UNASUR's stated goal of building confidence and trust on defense matters in the region through increased transparency.

In stark contrast, the assistance that the United States has provided through the Mérida Initiative, CBSI, United States Southern Command's *Enduring Friendship*, Plan Colombia, and other programs cannot in good faith be construed as inciting an arms race in the region. These initiatives all facilitate the U.S. goal of building our partners' capacity to provide for their own security and the security of the region.

### **Myth Six: U.S. military training and education is not committed to the promotion of human rights**

The sixth myth is that U.S. military education, training, and capacity building conducted at institutions like the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia, is somehow responsible for—or promotes—human rights abuses. Secretary Gates has emphasized the Department of Defense's uncompromising commitment to human rights. Indeed, as he noted in November 2009 at the German Marshall Fund Security Conference in Halifax, Canada, “strong human rights programs are vital when conducting military responses” because “security gains will be illusory if they lack the public legitimacy that comes with respect for human rights and the rule of law.”<sup>14</sup> The argument for human rights is no longer strictly a moral one—although it unquestionably remains a moral imperative. Respect for human rights is also indispensable to the legitimacy of institutions and democracies and, therefore, our national security.



Official White house photo by Pete Souza

**President Felipe Calderón of Mexico and President Barack Obama stand together during the playing of their national anthems on the South Lawn of the White House, 19 May 2010.**

The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation is an example of how the department makes good on its commitment to human rights. The Institute has a mandate to educate and train military, police, and civilians in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS), including those principles related to democracy and human rights. As a result, WHINSEC offers a robust Democracy, Ethics, and Human Rights Program that focuses on issues such as the rule of law, due process, civilian control of the military, and the role of the military in a democratic society. As part of this program, WHINSEC requires students to take a democracy and human rights class. To ensure that this course is as relevant and beneficial as possible, WHINSEC has developed its own case studies of real, contemporary instances of human rights abuses. One example used is the massacre at My Lai.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the democracy and human rights class, the Institute has also designed the “Engagement Skills Training Facility,” a computerized simulator that requires students to make split-second decisions on whether or not to fire a weapon in situations that

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present classic dilemmas in human rights and the lawful use of force. The Institute also offers a human rights instructor course, which prepares students to be human rights instructors in their own organizations. In Fiscal Year 2009, 125 students from seven countries—Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru—graduated from this course. Finally, every July, WHINSEC organizes a democracy and human rights week during which every student attends lectures and discussions on human rights. Practical exercises are also included; for example, a trip to Andersonville National Historic Site stresses the need for humane treatment of detainees and prisoners of war.

The training WHINSEC provides is similar to the training provided in a number of institutions. The Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, for example, provides expertise for civilians in governance of ministries of defense and training and support for the drafting of national security strategies.<sup>16</sup> The Inter-American Air Forces Academy provides courses that cover human rights, weapon safety training, aircraft maintenance, and engine technician training.<sup>17</sup> And United States Southern Command exercises such as TRADEWINDS, PANAMAX, and UNITAS seek to improve cooperation, shared military tactics, domain awareness, and interoperability.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, there are no sinister or shadowy intentions in the training and education opportunities that the Department of Defense offers. Rather, the department's objective is to strengthen partnership, build capacity, increase interoperability, and create neighborly camaraderie.

### **Myth Seven: U.S. Cuba policy is either too over-reaching or too modest**

Although not necessarily a security or defense issue, the seventh myth concerns Cuba. In discussing Cuba, there are two critiques of the Obama administration's policy to date. Simply stated, critics contend the administration has done either too much or not nearly enough. Some claim the administration has not sufficiently broken from the past while others accuse it of propping up repressive Cuban authorities. Neither is correct. It is important to recognize that the President has done exactly what he promised he would do with regard to Cuba

policy. He has removed restrictions on family visits and remittances; he has sought to engage on issues of mutual interest such as migration and direct postal service; he has sought to increase the flow of information to, from, and among the Cuban people; and he has stood up in defense of the basic human and political rights of the Cuban people by denouncing the tragic death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo and renewing his call for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. Consistent with this approach, in the wake of the tragic earthquake in Haiti, the United States also cooperated with Cuba to expedite the arrival of critical supplies to victims and survivors of the disaster.

In sum, the promises that President Obama has fulfilled are significant. They create opportunities for relationship building and exchange, and they demonstrate that the United States is sincere in its openness and in its desire to write a new chapter in the history of U.S.-Cuban relations. Of course, a fundamental change in the U.S.-Cuba relationship requires action and good will from both sides. Unfortunately, the Cuban authorities have demonstrated little good will and even less positive action to date. As Secretary of State Clinton noted, the Cuban authorities remain intransigent.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the continued obstinacy of Cuban authorities, U.S. policy remains focused on reaching out to the Cuban people to support their desire to determine their future freely, and it remains committed to advancing its national interests. Thus, the promotion of people-to-people bonds will continue. The risk that such bonds somehow aid current Cuban authorities is negligible. As such, the administration's approach is appropriately cautious because it strikes the right balance between moving the U.S. relationship with Cuba in a positive direction and maintaining pressure on the Cuban government to allow the Cuban people to be truly free.

### **Conclusion: Proactive communication trumps misinformation**

It is worthwhile to reflect on why a number of U.S. policies toward the Americas are in need of clarification. Of course, international relations are complicated, and misunderstandings are inevitable, whether sincere or strategic in nature. Moreover, misinformation, distortions, and lies frequently

seem to outpace truth and facts. It is unsurprising, therefore, that communication and messaging is an increasingly important determinant of the ultimate effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. The United States will only gain by embracing this truth and being proactive in explaining its intentions and

objectives, both domestically and abroad. Through aggressive transparency and communication, the United States can frame its message and in doing so, undermine any attempts to misconstrue its motives. The arguments detailed here provide a solid basis for what must be an ongoing effort. **MR**

## NOTES

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